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ABSTRACT

The future of higher education is more uncertain now than it has ever been and it is interesting to examine and speculate as to causes and possible results. Values and sanctions that have previously motivated unquestioned acceptance of the legitimacy of higher education are, like many other values and sanctions in our society, presently undergoing severe scrutiny and modification. Consider those former students who bought the sanctions of schooling with all the requisite obedience to authority, competition for grades and recognition, perseverance at tedious and often meaningless school work: How will these educated, analytical people respond as taxpayers to paying the salaries of professors whom they most remember as aloof and concerned primarily with tenure, research, and publications? It may become difficult for these taxpayers to willingly support an elitist subculture. It may well be that we are in an evolutionary process that will yield a conception of life-long learning as a social good. Perhaps as we witness the demise of education in its present forms we are also seeing the process by which our culture will become democratic. (Author/MSE)

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THOUGHTS AND SPECULATIONS ON THE POSSIBLE DECLINE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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Thoughts and Speculations on the Possible Decline of Higher Education in the United States

The future of higher education is more uncertain now than it has ever been and it is interesting to examine and speculate as to causes and possible outcomes. As with any social institution whether staking out a new claim or maintaining an old one, the question of the legitimacy of that particular institution's sanctions are of primary importance. Questions of legitimacy arise from the belief systems of a society and are dealt with through what an institution can or cannot do to or for people. Our fire departments establish their legitimacy by putting out fires for us: the IRS maintains its legitimacy by what it does to those of us who refuse to play the game according to its rules.

Values and sanctions which previously have motivated unquestioned acceptance of the legitimacy of higher education, are, like many other values and sanctions in our society, presently undergoing severe scrutiny and modification. The belief system is being challenged by the realities of day to day life. A generation ago higher education was able to draw students to its hallowed halls on the premise that a college education was an essential step in the rites of passage of social advancement. Presently this sanction is having difficulty holding water as alumni with various, Bachelors, Masters, and even the elite of the elite, Doctors of sundry Philosophies, and Sciences from any and all schools are finding themselves "over-educated" and "over-qualified" for entry level position is areas which just a few years ago

were unthinkable for college educated men and women.[1]

More and more young people are now longing for skills such as carpentry, baking, plumbing, and so forth while at the same time finding apprenticeship programs in the trades filled to saturation. In my own experience, in addition to teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I own and operate a general-contracting business, a move necessitated by a zero job market for Ph.D.s at the time I graduated. Since its inception four years ago, my company, which is a union shop, has had only one carpenter out of a dozen or so who was not a college graduate. At one time in recent months our crew was made up of two persons with bachelors degrees, three with masters, and two with Ph.D.s. In my contacts with other builders around the country I have found our situation to be not unusual.

The question of opportunity costs is similarly an important issue when examining higher educations' claims for legitimacy. College graduates return home or to the job market to discover peers who elected trade schools after high school are now four or more years into a career as well as being ahead of the collegiate in terms of social advancement, material acquisition, financial security, and maturity. The collegiate is not infrequently deeply into debt for educational loans and the resultant squeeze is reflected in the high rates of foreclosure against such loans nation-wide. The present financial situation not withstanding, we seem to have more college prepared people than we have economic opportunities to go around. If nothing else we have seen that widespread higher education has not significantly altered the distribution of wealth in this country and that the economic system is still in the hands of a relative few.

All of the foregoing give rise, I think, to some interesting questions. Consider, for instance, those former students who bought, as it were, the

sanctions of schooling with all the requisite obedience to authority, competition for grades and recognition, perseverance at tedious and oftentimes meaningless school work. What will be the attitudes of these people as taxpayers when asked to meet the costs of maintaining state supported universities and colleges? How will these educated analytical people respond to paying the salaries of professors whom they most remember as aloof and concerned primarily with tenure, research, and publications? Is it not reasonable to expect alienation to follow in the wake of disillusionment and the net result of alienation, withdrawal of support? It may become, I feel difficult for these taxpayers to willingly support an elitist subculture who through it all have remained consistent to the principle interests of social status, research, their own financial security, and collegial life styles far from the madding crowd.

Another interesting contradiction arises from the first. Given the possibility of the educated masses' refusal to support higher education through taxes comes the assurance that only persons of economic means would be able to meet the costs of attendance and thereby reestablish and reinforce the elitist nature of even public higher education. In so doing, the educated masses would push higher education further from themselves and their realities but most importantly away from their own children. In effect their actions would have turned on themselves from the viewpoint of social evolution.

Returning to the present situation, let us consider yet another important possibility. As the feed-back loop to the campus and beyond there to high-schools and even the lower grades begins to filter the discoveries of college graduates of no jobs, no rewards, no status at the end of the educational process, expectations and attitudes are being modified to accept

and adapt to this new perception of reality. The resultant changes in values and expectations among public school students and undergraduates includes the loss of legitimacy of many of the educational establishment's sanctions necessary to maintain control and belief in the long process by which students previously had "qualified" themselves for their places in society. In a recent forum an eminent scholar implored his colleagues ~~about~~ TO CONSIDER the "debasing of (our) academic currency" through grade inflation.[2] It was interesting to note both his conception of grades as academic "currency" and his appreciation of the effects of such debasement in the marketplace. Prospective employers will come to view grades with suspicion thereby being hampered in their need to sort out the good from the mediocre, and the public will be victimized by inadequately prepared professionals who still slip through the net. It is also not unreasonable to expect that as the marketplace in which the academic "currency" is spent breaks down, that students will, for their part, no longer fear the outcomes of poor grades. With this loss of fear will go another important sanction necessary to maintaining the present system's legitimacy insofar as what they can do to someone is concerned.

I think now we are finding university apologists at the onset of a campaign to revise in the public mind, the "real" reasons for higher education. Also colleges and universities are presently seeking out new markets for their services. Already a good deal of committee work is being done to establish evaluative criteria for competency based degree programs in which students would be given university credit for what they presumably already know by virtue of having done this or that job. Many colleges and universities are reviving a modern day version of the "furniture of the mind" approach to selling education. In this scheme prospective students are to expect improvements of mind, enrichments of their lives, and the better-

ment of society in general. Another thrust will be the appeal to "adult" students, housewives, blue-collar workers, executives, or whomever. Extended timetable classes offered during the evening hours are advertised in various media aimed at this mature audience. In short, every attempt is being made to appeal to as broad a clientele for as many plausible reasons as can be imagined. Just like any other service in the marketplace, higher education is going to have to justify its existence continually. Just how long the traditional structure of the university can withstand this exposure and the need to be broadly appealing will be interesting.

Given the wide-spread lack of enthusiasm of taxpayer groups around the country for school related taxation at the public school level it is not a all unreasonable to expect more pressure on state supported insitutions of higher education. All of this is meant to call to your attention the possibilities which lie before us. There is no better way to insure the extinction of an institution than to believe it to be above radical change. Universities do not exist outside of or above the contemporary belief system. All social institutions need public support and all need public scrutiny. When the public is educated the nature of the scrutiny is more analytical, more critical. Higher education needs legitimizing sanctions which are in tune with the needs of the larger society. The perception of social needs best takes place among and with the people, not aloof from or above them. In a sense what I am describing is academic populism.

It may well be that we are in an evolutionary process which will yield a conception of life-long learning as a social good. If this is the case, then to survive higher education's quality of highness must be readily perceived by those who must pay for it. It just may be that the clear definitions of higher and lower forms of education will blur and that all learning will be catagorized in ways which are less conducive to such distinctions.

All of this is to say that the legitimacy of public institutions must arise out of a dialectic with the public to be democratic. The praxis of a school must be the praxis of its students. If the students of a university are all of the people in a community then the university becomes, in this definition, more a process than a producer, more of a piece with the total community than a collection of enclaves separated by their having, or not having power over the lives of others. This conception is a process definition of democracy, Perhaps it may be the case that as we witness the demise of higher education in its present forms we are also seeing the evolutionary process by which our culture will become democratic.

In a democratic society, the distribution of knowledge is as vital as the distribution of material wealth. To expect educated "have-nots" to support the "haves" is hopeless. For the working classes to turn on themselves by witholding support for education is only to ensure continuation of the circumstances of their current stiuation in which they have virtually no control over the significant aspects of social development. The conceptions of social development as being concerend only with material things is also a dead-end, in evolutionary terms. John Dewey spoke of a democratic society as a great community[3] and it is this conception of development which could become the business of education. In community people share what they have, be it knowledge or materials. If sharing were the currency of academia then universities could move to the center of community life. And wouldn't that be grand?

NOTES

1. NEWSWEEK, April 26, 1976 pp 60-69
THE FUTURIST, December 1976, vol X, No. 6, pp. 296-303

2. JURGEN HERBST, The Future of Higher Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison Forum lecture, June 29th, 1976.

3. JOHN DEWEY, The Public and its Problems, Chicago, The Swallow Press, 1927